

The Launching Point:

The Absolute Basics of Club Formatting

Intro:

Roughly 25 years ago, it was rare to hear a DJ beat mix at a typical nightclub. Most mainstream nightclubs hired DJ's based on their ability to **program music** or **format**, which often included the ability to *create energy and control an audience*. A good speaking voice/presence was also required. While most of today's club owners and managers still consider formatting to be important, the popular culture and media have attached a great deal of importance to beat mixing, scratching and turntable tricks. But as you will learn, the nightclub "business" is based more on your dance floor energy and ability to generate drink sales (i.e., format) and less on impressing friends and/or other DJ's with advanced skills.

This tends to give experienced DJ's -- who have acquired an instinctive ability learning how to read an audience -- an advantage over newer DJ's (even if a new DJ exhibits superior turntable skills). Moreover, because DJ's can react to the crowd response and adjust the music accordingly, they generally have an advantage over live music, and while this was not always the case, a good DJ is going to make a club much more popular and profitable than a club that specializes in live-acts, bands, as such, because the offerings are inconsistent in quality and following, and the set-lists are fixed, meaning the audience has to adjust to the entertainment, vs. the entertainment continually adjusting to the audience, and its particular needs that evening...

To give it a context, here we'll divide the evening into three parts: A beginning (pre-show), middle (show), and an end (Not much to the end if the club closes at 2 AM, but that's most places in the US).

Like sentences in a story, you select songs to construct paragraphs or "sets." For example, a disco "set" (or paragraph) would consist of 4 or 5 disco songs played back-to-back.

If the dance floor clears, it may only consist of two songs; conversely, if the dance floor momentum increases, the disco set may lengthen.

As a DJ, your job is to constantly monitor the dance floor to gauge whether the dancers enjoy the music that you're playing. So in a sense, the crowd is writing the story with you.

If the club is filled with regulars, then the sets that you construct must interest them. Even if non-regulars approach the DJ booth and plead with you to play contrasting styles of music, you should always maintain the club's "sound" (which may also be *your* sound).

A consistent music format is central to building a "following," be it yours or the club's – the intent and license there belongs to the club owner and his/her intent for the space – if part of that license is left to your discretion where it concerns the music, it had better meet the stated intent and be able to meet certain goals.

A format can take many faces, especially within mainstream dance music, because there's so much to work from.

As a DJ, even in a club with a dedicated group of regulars, i.e. core-clientele, over time, they can be groomed to your ideas of what's what...

Here's a nugget: If you can't find music you enjoy playing, and new music to break that's non-offensive to you within what's acceptable and works, then you're not a very creative selector... basically you're lazy **AND FULL OF SHIT...** It's out there and you can find it...

Pre Show:

The beginning of the night, or "pre-show," should consist of background-type songs played at a low volume. This is because you obviously don't want to play your best song at full volume (i.e., "blowing them out of the room") when most of the crowd is still arriving at the venue. For pre-show, you should play less intensive songs in a quasi-radio fashion.

It's this concept that many inexperienced club owners fail to recognize (even though, as the saying goes -- "if they're not dancing, they're drinking"). Instead of saving the best songs for later, the DJ will experience pressure to play many of the key "floor-packing" hits early in the night (for a few patrons that may want to leave early), peak early (i.e., burn them out), and run out of "key" songs when the majority of the patrons arrive.

If the DJ repeats those hits later, the customers and employees may complain that the DJ lacks depth and plays the same tracks repeatedly. (Ref: Playlist)

As the *de facto* leader of the club's atmosphere, *you* control the dance floor. As you gradually ramp-up the tempo and volume (more peeps in the club, soaking up sound) and beat structure of your songs, your first dancers should begin to appear. (there's typically a "moment" that you can feel, if you've ramped up your non-dancefloor program in a meaningful fashion, and if you don't drop that initial floorfiller, you'd have people falling face-first on the floor, thinking it was time –

and it was – but you fucked it up by not.... You won't fuck it up if you've gotten it there... you orchestrated it...)

As the floor momentum increases with additional dancers, you will sense that it's time to shift the mood ... end of pre-show, it's showtime.

Show:

The lights and volume will often increase to full intensity, you may speak on the microphone, and you may start playing key "hits" that - usually based on past experience - will get a packed dancefloor.

It's at this point that you begin the soul of the story.

You construct sets (see Table 1) and rotate your dance floor until (several hours later) you build to a peak -- or the climax of your story -- when you present the biggest hits in your record arsenal. This is when the club is at its busiest.

Table 1 - Constructing Sets

Sample of Good Playlist

Note that the DJ has a method of controlling the flow and energy level

<p>Top-40 Song 1 (well known to get them on the floor; like an introductory sentence)</p> <p>Top-40 Song 2 (less known, break a new song here - called "sandwiching")</p> <p>Top-40 Song 3 (better known to get them back in case Song #2 didn't work)</p> <p>Top-40 Song 4 (another hit to maintain the energy level and peak the set)</p> <p>Top-40 Song 5 (close the set with a less known to introduce the next set).</p> <p>House Song 1 (well known and matches the bpm and key of Top-40 Song #5) You may want to pick a transition song (like a transition sentence), that matches the style of your next set (i.e., a "crossover" hit).</p> <p>House Song 2 (same bpm and energy as House #1)</p> <p>House Song 3 (bring 'em down to get them to the bar and set up a hip hop set)</p> <p>Hip Hop Song 1 (Intent: change in bpm "rotates" floor – play a hit)</p>
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Sample of Bad Playlist

Note that there's no set construction and little regard for the dancers. By the time people get into a groove, the DJ has switched to something else.

<p>Disco Song at 112 bpm</p> <p>Trance Song at 132 bpm</p> <p>Hip Hop Hit</p> <p>Latin Dance Hit</p> <p>Hip Hop - Old Song</p> <p>House Song at 120 bpm</p> <p>Top-40 Hit at 140 bpm</p> <p>Hip Hop Song at 103 bpm</p> <p>Disco Song at 117 bpm</p> <p>Trance Song at 135 bpm</p> <p>Request for Top-40 etc.</p>

The End:

After the peak, you let them down (at last call) gradually until the club closes.

Some nightclubs like to play a few slow songs at the end of the night. There are several advantages to this approach. First, because the slow songs change the club's mood, the mellow atmosphere hopefully alleviates potential trouble between inebriated and energized patrons. Second, dancing to slow tracks gives couples a last chance to "hook-up." Finally, slow songs should add a sense of class to an otherwise wild evening of partying (particularly, for an older clientele).

Afterhours:

In most cities, afterhours entails spinning to patrons that want to dance more than drink. Generally, afterhours is relatively less stressful than the "show" of the night. For example, the afterhours DJ does not have to be concerned with "rotating" the floor to generate drink sales.

Depending on the club, an afterhours DJ may format this portion of the night like a rave DJ, whereas, even though the style may be constant (i.e., all hard house), *energy* levels build and decline (i.e., rotate) throughout the night. In addition, many rave DJ's like to take dancers on a "journey" (which is somewhat similar to the story writing concept discussed above).

Special Considerations:

Even during the hottest portion of your peak show:

You may want to consider that many customers generally are looking for an excuse to leave (particularly as time elapses into the morning, i.e. around 12AM – and before... will discuss later).

If you're trying to "hold" the crowd, try to captivate their attention by maintaining high energy levels and/or by keeping them in a trance (via the "journey" concept).

Blend mixing tends to enhance the "journey" concept (i.e., dance music); whereas "slam" mixing augments high physical energy (i.e., hip hop/crossover), and can be used effectively to initiate, or re-initiate momentum, i.e. to start a new set.

Okay, this is the basic framework to grasp, somewhat loosely, but you need to understand the slight difference in vocabulary to what's not used in the rave DJ's lexicon... or the same words, but how they're used elsewhere... understand these may change again...

I probably could have added more, but from here we can pivot off to other subjects and techniques, some of which are considered "trade secrets," but this is potentially the "most" you might find on the web, being instructional on what being a club DJ might really be like... because the "INFORMATION" is powerful... even when applied elsewhere...

...and not well-understood outside of a similar context as I've outlined above...

The reason there's not much real crossover in information is – There's not that much crossover in personnel... meaning, if you've mastered a field like we're discussing here, you probably won't find yourself looking for a one-off, one-hour set, EVER... :-)

With exception:

I can name a couple that came from well-trained Top-40 Dance environments:

DJ Hardware (Empty Pockets, Ft. Lauderdale – late '80s/early '90s along side my primary mentor in the field, Karson "Chuck" Tager)

DJ Dan

Donald Glaude (Trained DJ Dan as a Top-40 jock)

You can hear it in their sound... OR I can hear it in their sound...